

# connections

Massachusetts Community Networks to Eliminate Cancer Disparities through Education, Research, and Training

## MassCONNECT Researchers Explore How Journalists Write About Health Disparities

The media plays a big part in how health information is presented. Reporters don't just report the news—they decide what they think people will want to learn and then frame the stories.

MassCONNECT researchers from Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (DFCI) and Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) wanted to learn more about how reporters and journalists work. The researchers studied journalists whose writing reaches people in Boston, Lawrence, and Worcester. These three communities are all represented by MassCONNECT. The information that the MassCONNECT

team collected from the journalists showed how reporters decide which stories to write and what challenges they face. The team also learned that the reporters' own knowledge about health disparities can affect their story angles. Even more importantly, the information showed how MassCONNECT members can influence the way that health disparities are presented and perceived in the media.

### How this study can help your work

The findings from this study show that journalists face many barriers when they write about health disparities. However, the study also highlights ways that community groups can break down the barriers and help journalists present health disparities to the public:

- Community groups can partner more effectively with the media. Communicating clearly and more often will help journalists report on health disparities. **For example, after sending a press release, be sure to follow up with a phone call.**
- Training sessions for community partners and journalists are an ideal place to talk about why it is important to report on health disparities within the community agenda. **For information about media workshop trainings conducted by MassCONNECT, visit [www.massconnect.org](http://www.massconnect.org).**

"We must engage local journalists as partners... it is through the media that we can begin to shift the public discourse on health to include equity, social justice, and anti-racism."

—Nashira Baril,  
Boston REACH  
Coalition

- The public health community can help reporters find health information by giving them press releases, along with names of relevant sources and websites. Be sure to include local and human-interest angles, rather than just data. This will help the reporters flesh out their stories. **Researchers and public health practitioners can also help journalists by translating health jargon into simpler language.**

- Community groups are encouraged to provide local contacts. This will help reporters develop their stories and "put a face to the story." **Contacts should be available to talk to the media at times that work for reporters.**

### What we learned

Journalists face many challenges. Through the interviews, we saw several important issues, including:

- *Challenges to covering health and science news.* Although some journalists know a good deal about health, others were less knowledgeable. Most journalists said that when they can't reach community members who are directly affected by health disparities, it puts them and the story at a big disadvantage.
- *The journalists' own strengths.* Journalists want to choose or pitch their own stories. This means that they must think about how to set theirs apart from the many daily stories on health and medical science.
- *The factors that affect a story's angle.* Journalists are influenced by the medium used to present the story (print, television, or online). When framing the story for the readers or viewers, journalists said they also had to think about the public's impact, audience's personal behavior change, and audience's interests. They also had to consider what would make someone want to read, watch, or listen to the story.

"The media connection has had a major impact ... it has given us access to share our community forums and meetings and do outreach with the local newspapers."

—Chrasandra Reeves,  
Boston Alliance for  
Community Health

"This study provides us with valuable information to better understand who the journalists are, how they choose a specific health topic to report on, how to get their attention ... and at the same time make our work more effective and efficient."

—Clara Savage,  
Common Pathways

"Build personal relationships with the media. I exchange cell phone numbers with them so they can reach me when it is convenient for them."

—Vilma Lora,  
MHTF Lawrence

## What we asked

We began by doing an inventory of journalists from Boston, Lawrence, and Worcester. From there, we held in-depth, focused interviews with 18 journalists. All of the journalists we interviewed work in electronic and print media. We asked them to talk about:

- How often they rely on information from sources like government officials, industry scientists or spokespeople, other scientists or researchers, health care providers, and patient or advocacy organization representatives.
- How often they rely on government websites, other websites, news releases, and scientific journal articles.
- How important they see disseminating new and accurate information, educating the public, providing entertainment, developing public health and scientific literacy, and influencing the public's health behavior.
- How often they use these angles when writing a story: public impact, economic impact, controversial new information, human interest, and the need to change personal habits.

## The bigger picture: Large-scale studies of health in the news

Although the study featured in this issue of Connections focuses on just 18 local journalists, MassCONNECT researchers used a larger study to inform their work. The 2008 study "Occupational Practices and the Making of Health News: A National Survey of U.S. Health and Medical Science Journalists" was conducted by researchers at DFCI, HSPH, NCI, and other institutions.

In this study, 468 reporters nationwide were surveyed. The goal was to learn what influences journalists to report on a health or medical science story. The researchers found that:

- For most journalists, the initial idea for a health or medical science story comes from a suggestion by a news source.
- More than 80% of the journalists said that they often contact health care providers while they work on their stories. This was especially the case for local reporters compared with national reporters.
- Local reporters are much more likely to rely on patient advocacy groups than are national reporters.

**These findings suggest how important local contacts can be when reporters need help developing their stories.**

## About MassCONNECT

MassCONNECT (Massachusetts Community Networks to Eliminate Cancer Disparities through Education, Research, and Training) is a program that connects the Harvard School of Public Health, the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center, and multiple community partners in three Massachusetts cities. MassCONNECT aims to lower cancer disparities through cancer education, community-based participatory research, training, and cancer control services.

One of the most important aspects of MassCONNECT is the leadership of four key partnering community-based coalitions. They are:

- Boston Alliance for Community Health
- Boston REACH Coalition
- Common Pathways (Worcester)
- Mayor's Health Task Force (Lawrence)

MassCONNECT's goals are to:

1. improve data on community-level cancer disparities,
2. provide leadership, education, and training through coalitions with respected community groups,
3. educate local media to provide more coverage of cancer disparities,
4. promote access to cancer control and treatment services,
5. provide needs assessments that will lead to a community-specific plan to address gaps,
6. evaluate outcomes related to cancer disparities in the target communities, and
7. establish and expand relationships with National Cancer Institute (NCI) Divisions and NCI-supported initiatives.

1. Viswanath K, Blake KD, Meissner HI, Saiontz NG, Mull C, Freeman CS, et al. Occupational Practices and the Making of Health News: A National Survey of U.S. Health and Medical Science Journalists. *Journal of Health Communication*. 2008. 13(8): p. 759-77.

2. Wallington SF, Blake KD, Taylor-Clark K, Viswanath K. Challenges in Covering Health Disparities in Local News Media: An Exploratory Analysis Assessing Views of Journalists. *Journal of Community Health*. 2009 Dec 30. [Epub ahead of print].